

Ash Wednesday – Year B

Where there is smoke, there is usually fire. And fire typically provides ashes.

The ashes point to a past – what was. For example, the ashes in a fire place once were a log, but through the process of fire, became dark black ashes.

In some communities when a church burns to the ground, there is a tradition to save something from the fire. The something is usually covered with soot and ash and then encased and eventually placed in the new church, as a reminder of what was and as a sign that even from ashes, new life can emerge.

Today, the Church celebrates Ash Wednesday and formally begins the Holy Season of Lent – 40 days of prayer, fasting, and charitable works.

In a few moments, ashes will be placed on our foreheads and we will hear the words, “Turn away from sin and be faithful to the Gospel.”

The ashes which are the result of burnt palm branches from Palm Sunday point to our sinful, mortal existence that cries out for cleansing.

And yet, from these very ashes, and our embracing of these 40 days, new life can emerge for us individually and collectively.

On this holy day as we go back out into the world, so many people will be looking at our foreheads marked by ashes in the sign of the cross, indicating our willingness to walk with Jesus to his suffering and death.

The prophet Joel, however, in today’s first reading underlines the real forces of these days for every Christian – it is not the forehead but the heart. “Even now, says the Lord, return to me with your whole heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning. Rend your hearts, not your garments.”

Lent is all about the changing of our hearts – and reconciling ourselves with God and one another.

While many of us have ambitious plans for these days, many acts of self-denial from giving up chocolate to foregoing deserts, perhaps the main thing we need to do is look at and deepen our relationship with God and one another. Part of this change may involve saying, “I am sorry,” or “I forgive you,” or “I need you.”

May the Lord grant us the grace to change our hearts. And may the ashes which will soon be placed on our foreheads yield new life for all of us on this Lenten journey. Amen.